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“New Hearts, New Eyes”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

August 16, 2009
1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Luke 18:35-43

Mary Oliver begins her newest book, *Evidence*, with a little poem called “Yellow”.

It goes like this:

*There is the heaven we enter
through institutional grace
and there are the yellow finches bathing and singing
in the lowly puddle.*

The Boy/King Solomon could be called the first child of the Davidic covenant.

Yahweh has forged a covenant promise with his father, David,
to establish a house for Israel forever,
to raise up offspring to succeed David, forever,
to establish the throne of his kingdom, forever
and to never withhold his love from him or his successors,
forever and forever and forevermore.

And now David has died following a forty-year tumultuous reign,
and rests with his fathers in the city that bears his name.

And the Boy/King Solomon inherits both the throne and the promise,
the power and the pitfalls,
the soaring faith and the fatal flaws of his
father David and his mother Bathsheba.

And despite the fact that Solomon declares his unabashed love for Yahweh,
which mirrors his father’s intimate relationship with God,

he fails to mention that he also loves foreign women,
that he is rubbing shoulders with Egypt,
which is not exactly Israel's BFF, best friend forever,
that he has the blood of a half-brother, Adonijah, on his hands,
and that he has a proclivity for sacrificing and worshiping at outlying altars,
even though the ark of the covenant rests securely in Jerusalem.

His record to this point is anything but spotless,
although he insists that he is "only a little child".

The point being: inherited sin and acquired sin shadow his every move.

And yet... it is the benevolent Yahweh who comes to Solomon,
meeting him on the slippery slope of the verboten altar at Gibeon,
in the dark matrix of the night.

It is Yahweh who takes the initiative, approaching Solomon
at the place of his failing, under the cover of sin and darkness,
and whispers in his ear a gracious, open invitation:

"Ask for whatever you want me to give you," God offers.

*And there are the yellow finches bathing and singing
in the lowly puddle.*

I find it incredible that the Almighty invites this child of the covenant
to voice his desire.

"What do you want me to do for you?" God asks the Child/King.

One would think that God already would know such a thing.

One would think that God already would limit such an offer,

based upon Solomon's limited ability to maintain a flawless record.

But that God stoops to ask what we desire, is an incredible thing.

And Solomon talks in his sleep, I suppose,

and mumbles something about his youthful lack of experience,

about not knowing enough to carry out his duties,

and he tosses and turns and kicks off the covers

before he blurts out to God, and to the bats, owls,

and creatures of the night:

A new heart/mind that puts the shalom of God's people first, is what I desire.

A new heart/mind that puts the best interest of the whole people of God

before my own self interest, is what I desire as a wise ruler.

And because God is pleased with Solomon's request,

God consents to transplant a wise and discerning heart

into Solomon, and to give him even more than his heart's desire.

And when Solomon awakes, he realizes that it has only been a dream.

Or has it?

I wonder if God wants to know from each of us,

upon the point of entering into covenant relationship,

what we most desire for God to give us?

This assumes, of course, that God is a generous and giving God.

This also assumes that God wants to be in a relationship of mutuality with us,

hearing our desires, and working with us to make them manifest,

according to his will.

Is it too audacious to wonder if God wants us to share,

what we wish for him to confer upon us and our children

as we dive into the lowly puddle of covenant life?

Apparently not.

As Jesus is approaching Jericho, a blind man sitting by the road

cries out to Jesus twice, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus, no doubt the sighted one,

would have known exactly what the man meant by that.

Nevertheless, Jesus pulls up short, asks for the man to be brought nearer to him

and inquires of him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Again, the divine, the all-knowing, the all-powerful, wants to know

what this person desires most in his heart of hearts.

"To see," the blind man says. "To have new eyes."

And because he has the faith to ask, Jesus gives him new eyes to see.
And low and behold,
there are the yellow finches, bathing and singing
in the lowly puddle.

Back in the 1980's, when our own children were baptized into the covenant,
I think I remember how my husband and I
might have responded to an invitation like this from the Almighty,
or from the Gentle One to fulfill our hearts' desire for our children.
Good teeth, would have been one of our practical requests.
Curiosity and a love of learning and of reading,
would have been another important asset.
But a kind and compassionate heart would have topped all of these.
Hedge and I have always tried to teach our children to respond to
others with kindness and compassion.
And it has been detrimental, in some aspects, in that we fear
that we have raised gentle children in a not so gentle world.
But this is what we ultimately wished for God to give our children
in our young adulthood when we brought them
to the dipping font of Christ-life.

Of course, knowing then what I know now about the great tradition
of baptism in the church,
I also might have asked God on behalf of our children,
to couple baptism with *teaching* about God's grace,
with *teaching* about God made known in Jesus,
with *teaching* about the mercy of the Holy Trinity,
in that baptizing and teaching go together like hand in glove
in the Great Commission.
I also might have asked God to remind my children in their baptism
that God is always with them, close and nearby;

that God comes to them in the most God-forsaken places,
the places summed up in Jesus' cross;
that baptism identifies them with the broken and crucified Christ,
who links them to all those to whom he ministered,
the least, the neglected, the oppressed,
the poor, the dying, the sinful, the marginal ones in the world;
and that the wiping away of all tears has begun in the resurrection of Jesus,
and that that same beginning is washing over them
in the waters of baptism. (Gordon Lathrop. *Central Things*, p. 62)

And of course, knowing then what I know now about the trials and
tribulations of youth and young adulthood,
I should well have asked God to draw a circle of protection around them:
to keep their experiments in alcohol and drugs minimal;
to keep them from becoming ensnared in abusive relationships;
to keep them safe from the emotional and psychological
repercussions of the hook-up culture;
to keep them seat-buckled into every fast-moving car;
to guard them from random rogue viruses;
to deliver them from all evil;
or as one of my stairmaster friends at the YMCA likes to say -
"Just keep 'em alive 'til 25!"

As I read the story of Solomon, and thought seriously about
him being a child of the covenant, too,
and about God coming to him in this outpouring
of vulnerability and generous love,
I wondered if this is not a question the church should be asking
all of our parents as they prepare to baptize their children.
What do you desire God to give your child through this sacrament?
And so I asked some of our recent baptismal participants this very question,

to hear the depth of their heart's desires.

Janneke and Reuben Stob, who recently baptized their sons Ari and Alexander,

said that they see baptism as an important spiritual reminder

for all involved of a child's place in the family of God,

which continues with God's people today in baptism (with all of us).

“As our children grow, they said, “we wish that they would become

acutely aware of their place in God's family,

and acutely aware of who they are as fallen souls who

continually need support and guidance.

We hope that their baptism, and every other baptism they participate in

throughout their lifetime, will remind them of the

promises God has made to God's people

and of their commitment to serve God in response.”

La Tasha and John Cowden, parents of Seth and Giselle,

make this their heart's prayer:

“We hope for God to give our children the ability to understand

and reciprocate the love of family, friends, and one day,

marriage.

In addition, we hope our children will be able to distinguish right from wrong,

will always try their best, and will be truly happy in life.”

Katy and Walt Barron, who baptized their daughter, Ruby, last Sunday

admitted that as parents, there is only so much they can do for Ruby:

to feed and clothe her, educate her, protect her and care for her.

They will rely on others, family, friends, co-workers, teachers, neighbors,

fellow church members, and others beyond to help them daily.

“And yet, the deepest, most personal issues she will face in life,

are far beyond any of our control,” they confess.

Out of their feeling of limited control over Ruby's life,

here is Walt and Katy's prayer:

“We wish that God always reminds Ruby that she’s loved
beyond her imagination;
that her fears and sadness will pass; that she has a purpose;
that she never thinks she’s too good, or not good enough,
for a person, place, or task; and that every second of every minute
of every hour of every day is to be enjoyed and appreciated.”
*And there are yellow finches bathing and singing,
in the lowly puddle. Joy!*

And when I asked our family de jour, the Dillons, Amy and Pat,
what was their heart’s desire for God to confer upon their son, Noah,
Amy wrote a beautiful letter to Noah, which I hope they’ll save
and read to him on every August 16th anniversary of his baptism,
as he grows to understand
the unconditional nature of God’s love
and of its reflection in their parental love for him.
I won’t read the whole thing; it’s almost too personal, although it’s lovely.
But it speaks of a new mother’s delighted love for her child;
it speaks of the joy they take in every minute stage of Noah’s development;
and it speaks of the joy they take in his laughter, over Pat’s silly dances,
and their hope that one day Daddy Pat will teach him to play
the guitar.

(And I think that Pat has been holding out on us, when I read this!)

But it ends with a beautiful, beautiful prayer for baby Noah,
which I want to share with you:

“Today, in your baptism, I pray that God blesses you
with a tender heart, full of compassion;
a curious mind, full of wonder;
perseverance, no matter how daunting the task;
the courage to do what is right, even when it is not easy;

forgiveness, for both yourself and others, for no one is perfect;
laughter, for it really is the best medicine;
security, in the unconditional love of your family and God.
And I promise that we will do everything we can
to nurture these things in you,
and we will pray for God's continued blessings and guidance in your life."

Every day when I drive home from work, and exit I-85 at Cole Mill Road,
there is a rut in the side of the road where some car has
careened too far off the pavement to the right.
And more times than not,
the rut tends to be filled with a smear of muddy water.
But invariably, there is a flock of little brown sparrows in that puddle,
having the bird-time of their lives in that God-given rut-bath.
And I am reminded that baptism is a community event;
that I have never witnessed a baptism that wasn't joyful;
that its repercussions extend from God's love, to Jesus' love, to human love
and on into the natural world of God's creation;
and that baptismal promises completed in death, are fulfilled in
the joyful resurrection life that picks up on the other side of the road.
God is with us. God loves us more than we will ever imagine.
And God's love abounds both in the institutional grace,
and lowly puddle. Amen.